



BEST ROWING TOWNS

STORY BY **Bryan KITCH**

Like you, we're crazy about rowing, and we'll take it wherever we can get it.
But we do have our favorite places to row. Did yours make the cut?

THE NORTHEAST

TOP PICK **Boston**

In many ways, Boston, Mass., is the heart of rowing in the United States. Community and tradition come together in the closest proxy to Henley-on-Thames that the U.S. can offer, with thousands lining the banks during the Head of the Charles, and perhaps the most storied collegiate program in the country, the Harvard Crimson, comfortably seated next to Anderson Memorial Bridge, just five minutes from the edge of campus.

"One of the cool things about rowing in Boston is that when you tell people you are a rower, people know what it is," says Harvard men's associate head coach Bill Manning. "When you tell people you're a rower here, usually the next question is, 'How did you do at the Charles?' It's high profile and gets a lot of publicity, from both the local newspapers and TV. And it's a sport that is not just based on universities and area schools. You get juniors, clubs, masters, national team athletes, and all levels of university rowing."

While the city and culture have many great advantages, the key for Manning is the Charles itself. "One thing that I love about coaching in Boston is that we have a six-lane, 2,000-meter straight racecourse," says Manning. "It's surprising how rarely you can find a stretch of water so well suited to our purpose." In addition, the Charles serves to transport coaches and rowers from the hustle and bustle of the city to something almost pastoral, and back, all during a single outing. "One end of the Charles you're in the city, and at the other end, it's not quite rural, but it is a wall of green on either side of the river. For much of the year, you can be on that upper part of the river and forget you are in the city."

HOT AREAS

There are many more rowing hotspots near Boston, including Providence, R.I., home to the mighty Brown University Bears, who took the men's title at Eastern Sprints last year, and who have dominated NCAA competition, racking up seven national titles in 16 years under the guidance of John and Phoebe Murphy. Springfield, Mass., in the heart of the Pioneer Valley, is another nearby mecca.

To the north, Buffalo (West Side Rowing Club), Albany (home to the Albany Rowing Center), and Saratoga Springs (host town of the Head of the Fish) in New York State are further places to watch, with strong



clubs at both the senior and junior levels, as well as Ithaca, home to Cornell University.

Southern Connecticut has begun to take on a more prominent role on the national stage, building on its strong historical connections to the sport. New London is home to the Harvard-Yale Regatta, with the venerable Yale program training on the Housatonic in Derby. And at the 2012 senior and junior world championships, U.S. lightweight stand-out Andrew Campbell, who hails from New Canaan; Liz Trond of Connecticut Boat Club; and Günter Beutter of GMS, located in New Milford, helped place southern Connecticut firmly in the minds of the rowing public.

TOP PICK **Philadelphia**

Philadelphia, Penn., is another storied rowing city. One need only look at the oeuvre of famed American painter Thomas Eakins to get a sense of just how deeply rowing and sculling is woven into the fabric of the city. The first recorded regatta took place on the Schuylkill in 1835, between the Blue Devils and the Imps Barge clubs. The Schuylkill Navy, founded in 1858, is the oldest amateur athletic governing body in the United States. It's also home to the largest high school rowing competition in the U.S., the Stotesbury Cup Regatta, held continuously since 1927.



Boathouse Row, Philadelphia

“The history is such an important aspect of rowing in Philadelphia,” says Steve Kasprzyk, a member of the U.S. Olympic eight in London, who grew up in the Philly suburb of Cinnaminson, N.J., attended Drexel University, and has competed for Penn AC since 2005. “It’s where I started, so it’s always had a special place in my heart. There are a bunch of different clubs you can row out of, and no matter who you are or what your level of experience, you can find a good fit along Boathouse Row.”

Not only that, but there are more than enough chances to test your mettle on the water in Philadelphia. “There are three or

four head races in the fall, and when you get to springtime it seems like there’s a race every weekend,” says Kasprzyk. You don’t have to go too far from home if you want some good racing as a collegiate program on the Schuylkill.”

HOT AREAS

In the vicinity of Philly are yet more top towns, with Princeton and New York (with the NYAC rowing facility located at Travers Island on the Long Island Sound) boasting a great deal of tradition at the college, club, and elite levels. Not convinced? Bryan Volpenhein, Chris Ahrens, Jason Read, Wyatt Allen, and Peter Cipollone

of the U.S. men’s eight in Athens are all NYAC members. **Also, the work that New York Rowing has done at Overpeck Lake is likely to expand the racing schedule in the area in the near future.**

Pittsburgh, Penn., is worthy of mention, with the Three Rivers Rowing Association earning USRowing Club of the Year honors in 2010 and the annual Head of the Ohio regularly drawing 2,000 athletes and 100 clubs to race across a 2.8-mile course along the Allegheny River. South Jersey and Long Island are home to scholastic rowing hotbeds, in Egg Harbor Township, Galloway, Mays Landing, and Huntington.



MIDWEST, SOUTH, AND SOUTHEAST

TOP PICK: **Richmond**

While it may come as a surprise to some, Richmond is a southern rowing mecca. In addition to Virginia Rowing Club, the city boasts no fewer than four other major rowing organizations in the form of scholastic programs River City Crew and James River Rowers and college programs from Virginia Commonwealth University and the University of Richmond. The Occoquan Reservoir is located in nearby Fairfax and fall races include both the Head of the Occoquan and the Head of the James. Just over an hour west on I-64 is Charlottesville, home

to the 2012 NCAA champion Virginia women's rowing team, as well as the 2012 ACRA champion Virginia men's crew. Now do we have your attention?

"My favorite thing about coaching in Charlottesville is the body of water," says Virginia women's head coach Kevin Sauer. "I think it is the best rowing water in the world, with the high hills protection, no motorboats except for our coaching launches, freezing for just six to eight weeks maximum and sometimes not all. I could go on and on."

HOT AREAS

Around Virginia there are several other hotspots, including Alexandria, Arlington,

Woodbridge, and Falls Church, as well as Vienna, home to the James Madison High School program that took silver in the women's eight at the 2011 USRowing youth national championships. To the west, Chattanooga, Tenn., now hosts what has become one of the most popular races on the circuit in recent years, the Head of the Hooch.

Far to the north, Detroit, Mich., is another city worth a mention. Detroit Boat Club is the oldest rowing club in the United States, founded in 1839, and maintains a strong presence at the junior and club levels. Cincinnati, Ohio, must be on the list as well; the Cincinnati Juniors Rowing Club has consistently produced strong results on the



Chesapeake Boathouse, Oklahoma City
PHOTO: PETER SPURRIER

national stage, including four medals at the 2012 USRowing youth national championships in Oak Ridge.

TOP PICK **Oklahoma City**

OKC is more than just home to an elite training center. The rowing community has done its utmost to make rowing mainstream and it's starting to pay dividends. The Devon Boathouse, along with the Chesapeake Boathouse and Finish Line Tower, are the first of several distinctive, iconic structures that have set the tone for an era of growth and participation in our sport along the revitalized banks of the Oklahoma River. And that's just the first phase.

Oklahoma City Boathouse Foundation Executive Director Mike Knopp has done a tremendous job building momentum in the community as well as spearheaded a rowing program for the OCU Stars, which includes an uncommon emphasis on sculling at the college level. With an eye toward capturing more of the mainstream audience, Knopp and the OKC Boathouse Foundation have developed the OCU Head of the Oklahoma into a destination regatta, with the incorporation of 500-meter night sprints under the lights along the river's edge, as well as the USA Rowing World Challenge, which takes place every four years as part of the regatta festival and includes Olympic-caliber competition.

NEXT MECCA **Austin**

Austin, Texas, is primed and ready for its rowing coming out party. Hours before the racing began at the 2012 Heart of Texas Regatta last spring, host Austin Rowing Club signed the papers that will allow it to manage the new \$3.4-million city-built boathouse on Town Lake, signaling a new era for the club and for the sport of rowing in Texas. However, the sport was on the rise even before the official decision. "We were bursting at the seams already," says ARC president Camille Jobe. But even as facilities were in flux, ARC continued to grow. "In the last couple of years our membership increased by 20 percent," Jobe continues. "That says a lot for how much rowing is changing in this region." As of right now, the only eight-lane sprint course is 1,000 meters on Lady Bird Lake, though Henley-style, two-lane 2,000-meter racing can be conducted there. However, nearby Decker Lake would provide ample space to run a 2k course for future regattas.

HOT AREAS

Given the water and the weather, it's small wonder that the Southeast region has seen an explosive growth in rowing, with Florida leading the way. Orlando, in the heart of the peninsula, boasts a large number of clubs and scholastic programs, while Jacksonville University and Florida Institute of Technology have become increasingly competitive intercollegiate programs and perennial Dad Vail contenders.

NEXT MECCA **Sarasota**

Nathan Benderson Park is well on its way to becoming a premier rowing venue, thanks in no small part to the work of Paul Blacketter, project manager at Benderson Development Company. In addition to his role at Benderson, Blacketter was named chief operating officer of the SunCoast Aquatic Nature Association last April. The Florida World Aquatic Center at Benderson Park is scheduled to host the 2013 masters nationals, and will provide facilities for a number of aquatic sports, including dragon boat, triathlon, and canoe and kayak racing. Blacketter hopes to land the 2017 world championships, and has been working directly with FISA to ensure that the venue meets strict international regulations. Given the support of the community—last fall, Sarasota County approved a \$40-million plan to transform Benderson Park—and the success that rowing is already having in the area, Sarasota Crew has proven to be one of the most competitive clubs in the U.S. at the junior level.

THE NORTHWEST

TOP PICK **Seattle**

At first blush, it's easy to see why rowing has taken root so firmly in Seattle. Quite simply, the city is surrounded by water. Almost everywhere you look, you are granted a view of a waterway of some kind, be it Lake Washington, Lake Union, or even Puget Sound. And like Boston, it has a tradition of high-caliber collegiate rowing.

"I think that collegiate rowing has played a strong part in the growth of rowing in this country and that is certainly true of Seattle and the University of Washington," says Husky men's head coach Michael Callahan. There is a further, direct link between the development of rowing and the environment. George Pocock built his original racing shells out of western red cedar, which is native to the Pacific Northwest. "There is quite a tie between the natural topography and elements of the Pacific Northwest. Today, that relationship has been modernized. We now have carbon-fiber boats, and that development has partly to do with Boeing being in the area. And we have the same boat builder [Pocock] staying current with new materials and new design features."

"It's one of the most beautiful cities in the world, with the Cascade Mountains on one side, the Olympic Mountains on the other, and water everywhere," says Washington head women's coach Bob Ernst. "It's basically an inner-city type environment, with a very fresh and open feel to it. There is always a place you can row and find calm water."

Seattle is one of the most beautiful cities in the world."

—WASHINGTON COACH **BOB ERNST**

Like Boston, people in Seattle know rowing. "The Montlake Cut is just another channel with a bridge over the top of it if it's not for the 40,000 people who come to watch the Windermere Cup Regatta," Ernst says. "Since I moved to Seattle 39 years ago, the thing I have been most impressed with is the outdoors attitude of the people who live here. They come out to watch crew races, whether it's the Windermere Cup, the Husky Open, or the Head of the Lake. They are really enthusiastic sports fans and they are water fans. They have an appreciation for

what we are doing out here." It's one of the few places where people can often see rowing from their homes, helping to make the community more connected to the sport.

HOT AREAS

The greater Seattle area boasts a plethora of rowing hotspots, including Sammamish, Olympia, Tacoma, Mercer Island, and Bellevue. Also, sculling coach Carlos Dinares has set up his training center nearby, on Lake Samish, and the options for rowing and sculling at every level abound. Junior programs such as Everett and Mt. Baker are perennial contenders for the podium at the USRowing youth national championships. To the south, Portland, Ore., is another great rowing town, flanked on either side by the Columbia and Willamette rivers, and with Vancouver Lake, Wash., just to the north. To the south, Emigrant Lake is home to Ashland Rowing Club, which has a strong core of junior and masters rowers.

THE SOUTHWEST

TOP PICK **The Bay Area**

The San Francisco Bay Area is home to some of the largest and most successful rowing programs in the United States, at the junior, collegiate, and masters levels. And with the emergence of California Rowing Club as an elite training center, the region looks to be on the rise at the international level as well. There are many reasons to love rowing here, from the weather, to the terrain, to the abundance of waterways. Pacific Rowing Club head coach Bob Maclean has been involved in the rowing community in the Bay Area since the late 1970s, when he began as an athlete with the Oakland Strokes program.

"I was fortunate that I began rowing in 1978 at Oakland Strokes when rowing was an official scholastic sport in California," Maclean explains. "The very next year, the club system took over. It was electrifying really. We got to have all these scholastic teams unite under one roof, and we were really competitive. That's really when rowing took off in the area at the junior level."

"The first thing that comes to mind is the Oakland Estuary. I loved being able to

San Francisco Bay

row in a straight line for miles," says Maclean. "Every year, under head coach Joe Mees, our program would do a 16-mile row around Alameda Island. It was a great team bonding exercise and it would wipe you out." Also, like Seattle, rowing in the Bay Area has an urban feel. "I liked too that Oakland is a tough town at times. It added a new dimension to the training," recalls Maclean. Ultimately, however, the natural advantages are perhaps the biggest draw. "The terrain and geography is also very beneficial. It was easy to find hills and places to run steps for cross-training on land."

Now at Pacific Rowing Club in San Francisco, Maclean appreciates the city for all that it offers. "San Francisco is a fantastic city for training. There are not many places where you can do a beach workout within five minutes of the boathouse," he says. "We have kids from all over the city, so it's a good mix of athletes from both public and private schools. We're one of the most ethnically and demographically diverse programs around."

In the North Bay, Graham Willoughby of Marin Rowing Association has made great use of a favorable environment, to the tune of back-to-back national titles in the men's heavy and lightweight eights at youth nationals. "Most people have to row in salt water, but the weather is so good for training," Willoughby explains. "It seems like every day is ideal, temperature-wise."

A further benefit is the Bay Area's open-minded approach to training, which incorporates other disciplines, such as yoga, to maintain flexibility and strength. "It's kind of new age and progressive. You come up with a crazy, wacky idea out here and it doesn't get shot down," Willoughby says. "You can take advantage of the open-minded culture of the Bay Area and often create something beneficial that's entirely new."

HOT AREAS

Two words: Crew Classic. San Diego is a true hotbed of rowing, with miles of rowable water around Mission Bay and beyond. It's also home to a number of prominent club and collegiate teams. Just to the north, Newport, Long Beach, and Los Angeles are home to many very competitive programs, including Orange Coast College, UCLA, and USC. Sacramento is also on our hot list, playing host to many a national championship regatta at beautiful Lake Natoma, the site of this spring's IRA Regatta. ▣

Lake Union, Seattle
PHOTO: CHARLES LOZNER